

VZCZCXRO7985
PP RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHLB #0727/01 1401857
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 191857Z MAY 08
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1958
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2336
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 2642
RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000727

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR IO A/S SILVERBERG AND PDAS WARLICK
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/KUMAR/PHEE
NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER/GAVITO
DOD/OSD FOR USDP EDELMAN, ASD MBLONG, DASD KIMMITT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/18/2018

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [ASEC](#) [UNSC](#) [EAIR](#) [SA](#) [IR](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: ZAHLE LEADERS ARGUE NEW ELECTORAL LAW
MOST IMPORTANT ISSUE

REF: BEIRUT 718

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) In a May 19 luncheon with Zahle politicians and prominent figures, the Charge heard arguments for why a new electoral law, and in particular passing the Boutros Commission law, is tantamount, even more important than electing a president, because it could redistribute the votes in a way that would alter the parliamentary composition. Former Deputy Speaker of Parliament Elie Ferzeli said that resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict was critical to resolving Lebanon's problems. He identified Hizballah, fundamentalism (by all religions), and Palestinian arms as the three biggest problems facing Lebanon, adding that Lebanon cannot tackle these problems until the government is unified. In addition to agreeing on a new electora law, Ferzeli and the Mayor of Zahle, Assad Zgei, argued that the government should focus on institution-building. End summary.

2. (C) The Charge, accompanied by DATT and EmbOffs, attended a May 19 luncheon in Zahle, hosted by the Mayor of Zahle Assad Zgeib. Elie Ferzeli, former Deputy Speaker, Richard Jeresseiti, former Lebanese Forces member, and Mayor Zgeib's wife and brother Raymond Zgeib joined the luncheon. Zahle is west of Bekaa Valley and is a primarily Christian town. It was the site of an April 20 altercation between opposition activists and supporters of Phalange which resulted in two deaths.

SHOULD ENACT BOUTROS LAW
WITHOUT DELAY

3. (C) Elie Ferzeli was adamant that the political leaders currently negotiating in Doha (reftel) should focus on passing the Boutros law as the new electoral law. Agreement on a new electoral law is tantamount, more pressing than electing a president, he argued. He reported that he heard from opposition bloc MP Elie Skaff, who is in Doha, that the issue of redistricting Beirut is stalling negotiations over a new electoral law. (Note: In particular, Ferzeli told us the question of the Armenian votes factored into the Doha

negotiations. Under the 2000 law, the Armenian votes were in the same district as Sunni votes, whereas a return to the 1960 law would mean that the Christians would vote for Christian MPs, which could advantage the Christian Armenians. End note.)

14. (C) Jeresseiti interjected that the Boutros law is too complicated for the voters to understand. Ferzeli responded, "So? It is time to move our country to a more advanced legal system." Ferzeli proposed that the leaders in Doha take "strategic advantage" of the recent clashes to calm things down, prepare for presidential elections, agree on a new electoral law, and wait for a new U.S. administration, which he expects would "accelerate" the Middle East peace process.

15. (C) According to Ferzeli, the parliamentary elections are on schedule to take place at the end of spring 2009. However, he stressed, the elections hinge on whether there is a new electoral law. He believes the parliamentary elections, with a new electoral law, are more important than presidential elections, because the balance of party representation will change.

MIDDLE EAST PEACE PROCESS MOST IMPORTANT -----

16. (C) "The Middle East peace process is the heart of the regional conflict," Ferzeli declared. Downplaying the relevance of Iraq to regional strife, he insisted it is the Israeli-Arab conflict that lies at the center. He asserted

BEIRUT 00000727 002 OF 002

that Israel's existence is no longer in question, but rather is accepted. He said it was time for Lebanon to think of peace with Israel. "Resolving this," he argued, "will change the rules of the game, the rules of the struggle throughout the region. Hizballah's ideological rationale for its existence, as a resistance against Israel, would no longer be accepted."

THREE STRATEGIC PROBLEMS -----

17. (C) Explaining that there are three main problems facing Lebanon -- Hizballah, fundamentalism (including Christians), and armed Palestinians -- Ferzeli argued that the unity of Lebanon is a prerequisite before dealing with these three issues. "They cannot do anything at Doha regarding Hizballah's arms. The game is over. Even UNSCR 1559 does not have the power to deal with it anymore," Ferzeli declared. (Note: Ferzeli told us he survived three assassination attempts. The most severe, which left him blind in one eye and scarred on his face, was perpetrated by Lebanese Forces Samir Geagea, and explains why Ferzeli was certain to include some Christians as part of the "fundamentalist" problem. End note.)

SHIA NOT READY TO RULE -----

18. (C) Ferzeli, who resides in the town of Jobbjannine just south of Zahle, argued that the Shia do not want to rule Lebanon because they are not ready. He reasoned that they do not have strong relations with the West, nor a strong commercial base or educational institutions. Therefore, he continued, the Christians should reassert itself as the "face of the government." They are well-positioned to do so, he said, because they are the cushion between Sunni and Shia. He also noted that the Sunni Mufti of Jobbjannine, Syed Khalil Mayss, is "an extremist who takes money from (Future leader) Saad Hariri."

ADVOCATING INSTITUTION-BUILDING -----

¶9. (C) In addition to electoral reform, Ferzeli argued that the government should focus on institution-building. Zahle Mayor Zgeib, expressing his appreciation for USAID assistance in building Zahle's solid waste treatment/recycling facility, said he was hoping to have his city participate in the carbon credit program, run by the World Bank. He noted that the World Bank did not accept Zahle because it deemed his city too small.

¶10. (U) Bio Info:

-- Assad Zgeib: Affiliated with opposition MP Elie Skaf. Engineer by profession.

-- Richard Jeresseiti: Engineer and subcontractor, involved in U.S. Embassy Bahdad construction. Father heads Zahle Chamber of Commerce. Has broken relationship off with Samir Geagea of Lebanese Forces.

-- Elie Ferzeli - Deputy Speaker of the Parliament 1992-2005. Orthodox Christian, part of former PM Omar Karami's "National Gathering." When Zahle violence took place April 20, he played a constructive role, encouraging Amine Gemayel and Elie Skaf to talk to one another and calm the situation.

SISON